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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 TEL AVIV 001662

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

NEA FOR BURNS/SATTERFIELD  
NEA/SA/EX FOR AUSTIN-FERGUSON; DEPT FOR DS/IP/NEA;  
DEPT FOR DS/IP/ITA; DRL FOR A/S CRANER;  
NSC FOR ABRAMS/DANIN;  
USAID FOR DCHA, DCHA/FPP

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [KWBG](#) [PTER](#) [ASEC](#) [PHUM](#) [CASC](#) [KPAL](#) [IS](#) [GZ](#)

SUBJECT: THE SITUATION ON THE GROUND MARCH 17, 2004 --  
(1500 HOURS LOCAL) -- IDF INCURSIONS AND INTRA-PALESTINIAN  
FIREFIGHT CLAIM SEVEN LIVES.

THIS IS A JOINT MESSAGE FROM EMBASSY TEL AVIV AND CONGEN  
JERUSALEM.

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SUMMARY  
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[1](#)1. (SBU) IDF helicopter gunships fired missiles on a Gaza City building on March 16, killing two members of Islamic Jihad and wounding nine Palestinians. During an ongoing operation to locate tunnels in Rafah, the IDF killed four Palestinians and injured 12. In Gaza City, a Palestinian policeman was killed and 16 Palestinians were wounded during a firefight between Hamas and the Palestinian security forces. In the West Bank, Israeli settlers injured one Palestinian during a fight near the Gush Etzion settlement bloc and the IDF defused a 12 kilogram bomb on a truck trying to cross the Huwara checkpoint. End Summary.

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West Bank  
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[1](#)2. (SBU) ATTACKS:

-- Death: Nil.

-- Injury: Israeli settlers injured one Palestinian on March 16 during a fight near the Gush Etzion settlement bloc south of Bethlehem.

-- Bombs Defused: Israeli troops defused a 12-kilogram bomb that they found on a truck attempting to cross the Huwara checkpoint, south of Nablus, on March 16.

[1](#)3. (SBU) SECURITY DEVELOPMENTS/ARRESTS:

-- Palestinians clashed with Israeli troops in the Balata refugee camp on March 16, but no injuries were reported.

-- Palestinians protesting against the separation barrier clashed with Israeli police and soldiers in Al-Ram and Midya on March 16. Several Palestinians were treated for tear gas inhalation.

-- The IDF arrested 11 Palestinians across the West Bank on March 16.

[1](#)4. (SBU) CONFISCATIONS/DEMOLITIONS:

-- Israeli forces demolished a total of three homes in Silwad, Madama, and the Tulkarm refugee camp on March 16. Each of the homes belonged to Palestinian militants who are currently in Israeli jails.

-- The IDF seized a Palestinian home in the Hizma village, just outside East Jerusalem, on March 16 and converted it into an observation post.

-- The Jerusalem Municipality demolished a building in the Al-Tur neighborhood of East Jerusalem on March 16 for lack of a building permit. The building contained two apartments.

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GAZA  
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[1](#)5. (SBU) ATTACKS:

-- Deaths: Gaza City ) Israeli media and UNRWA reported two Palestinian members of Islamic Jihad were killed when IDF helicopters fired missiles at a house in Gaza City at 1600 hours March 16. (See "Incursions" and "Injuries" below.)

-- Deaths: Rafah -- Israeli media report that a total of four Palestinians were killed by IDF forces during an ongoing IDF search for tunnels in Rafah March 17. According to

Israel Radio, two of these men were involved in planting bombs in the area. (Also see "Injuries," below.)

-- Deaths: Gaza City -- According to media reports, one Palestinian policeman died during a firefight between Hamas members and the Palestinian security forces the morning of March 17. (Additional details in "Injuries," below.)

-- Injuries: Gaza City -- According to UNRWA, nine Palestinians were injured when the IDF fired on a Gaza City house March 16. (See "Incursions," below.)

-- Injuries: Gaza City -- Israel Radio and Ha'aretz reported that at least 16 Palestinians were wounded during exchanges of gunfire between Hamas activists and Palestinian security forces in Gaza City during the morning of March 17. According to Ha'aretz, forces under the leadership of PA Chairman Arafat's cousin, Moussa Arafat, ordered a carload of armed men to stop, but the men opened fire on the security forces and a firefight ensued. Israel Radio reported that Kassam missiles were found in the vehicle.

-- Injuries: Rafah -- Israeli media reported that a total of 12 Palestinians were injured by IDF fire during the March 17 IDF search for tunnels in Rafah, noted above.

-- Mortars/Rockets/Hand Grenades: The IDF reported that three mortar shells and three anti-tank rockets were fired at IDF soldiers in various locations in the Gaza Strip during the reporting period.

--Mortars/Rockets/Hand Grenades: Catch-up -- The Bank of Palestine, in a March 17 letter to the Ambassador, stated that on March 15, the Naser branch of the bank suffered extensive damage to both building and equipment due to an IDF missile attack. One of the two workshops fired on by the IDF March 15 was located in the Naser neighborhood.

-- Shootings: The IDF reported three shootings at IDF soldiers and APCs during the reporting period.

-- Explosions: Nil.

16. (SBU) ARRESTS: Nil.

17. (SBU) INCURSIONS/DEMOLITIONS: At approximately 1800 hours March 16, IDF helicopter gunships fired missiles at the Haroubi family home in Gaza City's Nasser neighborhood. According to Ha'aretz, two Islamic Jihad operatives, Hussein Sarafiti and Nasser Yassin, were killed and nine people were injured. The target of the strike, according to Ha'aretz, was Mohammed Haroubi, a senior Islamic Jihad field operative allegedly involved in the attempted terror attack on the Erez Crossing March 6.

18. (SBU) BORDER CROSSINGS/CHECKPOINTS

-- Route Four (Salahadeen Road), the main north-south traffic artery, was open for Palestinians during the reporting period.

-- Erez Crossing was closed. The Erez Industrial Zone was open, with 3661 workers entering the Zone on March 17.

-- Sufa Crossing was open during the reporting period.

-- Karni Terminal was open during the reporting period for the import and export of goods into the Gaza Strip.

-- Rafah Terminal was open for Palestinian travelers during the reporting period.

-- Tel al-Sultan checkpoint and Toufah checkpoint were closed during the reporting period, according to UNRWA.

19. (SBU) POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS:

According to press reports citing Israeli security officials, during a March 16 political-security cabinet meeting, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon ordered the IDF and Shin Bet to "act without limitations" against top figures from all terror organizations. A senior security official told Israeli mass-market daily Yedioth Ahronoth, "Contrary to what happened in the IDF's hasty departure from Lebanon, when Hizbullah chalked up a victory, we have no intention of leaving the Gaza strip with out tail between our legs . . . Israel intends to withdraw from the entire Gaza Strip, but not before it teaches the terror organizations a lesson that won't be forgotten quickly."

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Israel  
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10. (SBU) According to Israeli Media, security forces at Ashdod Port closed down a section of the port on the morning of March 17, after hand grenades and other weapons were found

in a bag hidden in the false bottom of a container. The container was believed to have passed through the Karni Crossing in the Gaza Strip, according to Ha'aretz.

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